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C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 002431

SIPDIS

NSC FOR C. BARTON
USCINCSO ALSO FOR POLAD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/08/2013

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SUBJECT: VENEZUELA'S RECALL REFERENDUM: OBSTRUCTIONS AND
OBSERVERS

Classified By: A/DCM Abelardo A. Arias for reason 1.5 (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) With little more than two weeks to go before the scheduled Presidential recall referendum, Venezuela's National Electoral Council (CNE) refused July 29 to consider requests to changes in voting locations which the opposition claims were done fraudulently. The more than one million changes, according to Accion Democratica's Henry Ramos Allup, affected persons who the government had identified as signers of the petition to recall the President. Sumate, however, believes the changes will not/not have a major effect. Separately, the OAS observer mission began operations after signing its agreement with the CNE. Despite the agreement, mission members do not expect things to go smoothly as they approach the referendum. End Summary.

Where to Vote?

2. (U) CNE director Jorge Rodriguez announced July 29 that the CNE would not consider requests to correct changes of voting location submitted after midnight July 26. Accion Democratica Deputy and Secretary General Henry Ramos Allup told reporters July 26 that the CNE had fraudulently changed the location where more than one million persons (1.16 million) are to vote. In response to the allegations, Rodriguez said CNE offices around the country would be open until midnight to address the problem.

3. (U) Ramos said the number is nearly four times the number of voluntary changes they would normally expect over a six-month period. Ramos highlighted the case with the names of some municipal officials who have not moved, are in office, and whose voting location has been changed to distant points. Media reports publicized numerous cases of Venezuelans who have been finding the changes as they check their registration via Internet and an 800 number. (The divergent information from these two sources has led to opposition charges that the CNE is working with duplicate electoral registries.) Some examples were changes within a city, but others were more egregious, such as a person who had been moved from one end of the country to another (Zulia to Amazonas).

4. (C) CNE President Francisco Carrasquero called the changes routine, the result of citizens' changes of address. He cited himself as an example, noting that he had always voted in Zulia and now the electoral registry shows him voting in Caracas. Aragua State Governor Didalco Bolivar told Charge July 27 that the government's switch some one million voters' voting place will be seen for what it is (an attempt to reduce opposition votes).

5. (C) Opposition representatives told reporters they would bring the matter to the attention of the international observers. Edgardo Rheis, the number two under Brazilian Ambassador to the OAS Valter Pecly in the observers mission, told A/DCM that he knew of the allegations, but the opposition had not approached the OAS yet. He noted that the electoral registry had not been finalized and that such changes are not unusual. He said the number of changes alleged, however, and the distances cited as examples smacked of something wrong.

6. (C) Sumate's Luis Enrique Palacios said the NGO is conducting a study to see how many people have been moved against their will. Palacios said that the Governance Accord event for August 1 is designed to inform people about the Accord, but more importantly to get people to figure out where they are registered to vote. Sumate also plans a poll for July 31-August 1, where volunteers will visit over 1,000 people around the country to ask them about the change of voting centers. The Sumate hypothesis is that the change in voting locations will not have a major effect on the referendum.

Why the Changes?

17. Fernando Bazua, National Democratic Institute consultant working with the Coordinadora, told A/DCM July 27 that Coordinadora leaders believe the changes are part of President Chavez's strategy to bring down the number of guaranteed yes votes for the recall. (Ramos alleged that the people who had been changed had been identified as signers of the petition calling for a presidential recall referendum.) Bazua noted that, although the number of the fraudulent changes may not total the AD number, even half the alleged 1.1 million would be significant. He also pointed out that while the opposition appears to have discovered the phenomenon early, the possibility of confusion on August 15 will favor Chavez. Former Supreme Electoral Council President also did not discount that Chavez supporters had resorted to the maneuver. He told A/DCM July 29 that Accion Democratica itself had manipulated the electoral registry to redistribute its known supporters during gubernatorial elections, albeit unsuccessfully.

18. (C) Bazua acknowledged that, as the poll numbers showed, Chavez had done well in boosting his support, and the voter location changes would help bring the opposition numbers down. That, however, would not be enough, he said, and asserted that another Chavez fraud effort involves the growth of the electoral registry. Bazua asserted that contrary to what some Chavez opponents espouse, all the new voters cannot be Chavez supporters. The trick, he said, is that a portion of the new voters are only names. Using different identity cards issued by the government, one person could assume various identities and vote multiple times, Bazua asserted. He said that is why the CNE is insisting on using the untried fingerprint comparison machines to spot possible multiple voting instead of indelible ink.

19. (C) Aurelio Concheso, President of the libertarian think tank Center for the Dissemination of Economic Information (CEDICE), told PolOff July 29 that the President's polling people had told Chavez July 22 that he would lose the August 15 referendum, probably by 10 percentage points. According to Concheso, Chavez responded by criticizing Vice president Jose Vicente Rangel, who had recently mounted a campaign to delay and obstruct the referendum (i.e. CNE announcement of voting center changes, international observer obstruction).

110. (C) Gov. Bolivar told Charge July 27 that although he is confident Chavez can win, it's not in the bag. Bolivar said he looks not only at polls that measure intent to vote in the referendum, but also polls that look at the regional elections. He says the latter has bad news for Chavez: Voters in a number of Chavista states -- primarily those led by the most radical Chavistas -- show flagging support. This includes Tachira, Merida, Portuguesa, Cojedes, as well as opposition states of Zulia, Miranda, Carabobo, and Anzoategui. Chavez has a clear message, according to Bolivar, but it is not enough. The various "misiones" are important, but at most they reach 1.2 million out of some 13 million voters. And, some 385,000 of these persons actually signed the referendum, and only 50,000 recanted in the reparos, which means that voters will take the money, but not necessarily give their allegiance. Chavez has a problem reaching younger voters, and his choice of campaign image -- the battle of Santa Ines -- will not convince younger voters.

OBSERVERS

111. (C) OAS observer mission leader Rheis told A/DCM July 28 that they do not expect things to go smoothly with the National Electoral Council (CNE). Rheis said the agreement the OAS signed with the CNE provides the conditions they need to do their job. The CNE, he said, will of course try to rein the international observers, and the observers will push the envelope to get their work done. Rheis said they would abide by certain CNE conditions, such as the limitation on

the number of observers (50-51), providing the CNE biographic data, having one person participate in CNE director Oscar Battaglini's program for observers.

112. (C) They will not, however, abide by Battaglini's date of August 9 to begin their work. Rheis said personnel will come in before that, and if questioned, the mission would refer to them as "advance workers" rather than observers. (Rheis said President Chavez had told him and Pecly the week before that he understood their need to have people in earlier.) Rheis also noted that the agreement says the OAS accepts that the CNE reserves the right to make public the content of the Mission's reports and (the OAS) will abstain

from making public its final report. Rheis said there is no problem with that since there is no "Final Report" per se, only a report to the Secretary General, and they will issue statements not reports.

113. (C) As for the Mission's composition, Rheis said it would include two people each from Japan, U.K. and Spain plus three from Canada. Unlike the delegation for the May appeals process, the OAS will not include government officials on this occasion. Asked whether this applied to officials from the legislative as well as the executive branch Rheis said unfortunately, yes.

COMMENT

114. (C) President Chavez and his supporters have been confident that they have the winning numbers. They are not, however, leaving things to chance Chavez has been down the road where they have underestimated opposition strength twice this year, and they appear to be unwilling to leave anything to chance. The CNE's refusal to address the concerns about the changes in voter locations, regardless that the real dimensions of the issue may are not clear, is a set-back for the opposition, but can serve as one more negative they can attribute to the President. The CNE's attitude toward the international observers also gives us pause. The OAS attitude, however, appears to be the right approach. There is fortunately still a reluctance among Chavez and his supporters to shun international opinion completely, which gives the OAS and Carter Center some additional room to maneuver.
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2004CARACA02431 - CONFIDENTIAL